IN PRAISE OF COMMON VIRTUE

November 4, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Matthew 23:1-12
Philippians 4:1-9

"...whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."
-Philippians 4:8 (NRSV)

Several weeks ago we called a country store and bakery we know about which makes particularly good apple pies. We wanted to order four and we wanted to pick them up on Monday morning. The problem, the proprietor explained, is that if the weather is not nice, he doesn't like to open his store on Monday morning. "We really want those pies," we told him, so he proposed a plan. "If it's raining and the store is closed, come to our house near the store. We may be out, doing errands. Just come in the back door and in the laundry room, on the dryer, will be your four pies. Just leave the check on the dryer." "You don't even know us," we said. "We could walk off with the pies and the dryer." "I'll take a chance," he said. And he did and we did and the pies were delicious and so was the whole experience.

In praise of virtue, common virtue - honesty, dependability, loyalty. Most of the moral dilemmas which occupy our attention are dramatic. Most of the ethical quandries, about which ethicists write and over which we argue, are extraordinary: whether to bear an unwanted child or have an abortion; whether a convicted murderer should be executed or go to prison for life; whether a nuclear bomb should be dropped in response to a nuclear attack, in anticipation of an attack or at all; whether a terminally ill person should be kept alive by heroic medical technology... Those are critical questions and there is a sense in which our culture defines itself by the ways it deals with and resolves them. There is also a sense in which the releyance and authenticity of any religion is defined by the way it deals with the critical moral questions. But there is another level of morality that I am calling ordinary - common.

The simple truth is most of us will not have to make major determinations today. We will exercise our accountability for the public quality of life by voting this Tuesday, but most of us will not personally have to make definitive decisions. We will, however, live in relationship

with other people today, tomorrow and in the future. We will have to pay bills, buy groceries, go to work, and live in various kinds and levels of human community. We will not be called on to decide whether or not to drop the bomb, but we will decide to be kind, rude, thoughtful or thoughtless, honest or dishonest a number of times before this day is out. Religion ought to account for that as well as the dramatic moralities.

And this faith of ours does. Professor Joseph Sittler said once, "My humanistic sensibilities are not shriveled by virtue of being a Christian. "And," he added, "that is often a shock to my listeners." [Grace Notes and Other Fragments, p. 59]

What a peculiar thing to say. But the truth is that zealous religious commitment often is not synonymous with common virtue, civility, decency. Sometimes, in a tragic reversal, zealous religion seems opposed to ordinary civility.

A devastating political cartoon in the paper this morning showed six battle-ready soldiers on their knees in an attitude of prayer. On the back of each was an inscription...

Kill the Arabs
Kill the Jews
Kill the Moslems
Kill the Hindus
Kill the Catholics
Kill the Protestants

Sometimes we need a reminder that Christians ought to be as least as good as their culture.

It is not a new issue.

"Finally," St. Paul wrote, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, pure, pleasing, commendable - if there is any excellence, think about these things."

What's behind that passage in Paul's letter to his Christian friends in the city of Philippi is a question about the relationship between Christianity and the culture. Philippi was a thoroughly Roman city. In that environment, under the stress of minority status, ridicule, discrimination, and eventual persecution, the young Christian churches tended to take a dim view of the culture around them. Better to stay at arms length and have as little to do with the world as possible. Better to reject the world and teach that rejection to the children as a basic Christian value. Better to be suspicious even of the world's common virtue. As a result, early in our history Christian churches flirted with an exclusiveness which bordered on provincialism and sometimes an unattractive self-righteousness. Anything Roman was wrong. To be a follower of Jesus meant cutting oneself off from customs, entertainment, education, arts, food, even the values of that culture. Paul himself often urged his readers to be careful about identifying with the world.

But, at the end of his letter to the Philippians we find an unusual admonition which indicates that the early Christians were too zealous, were over-doing it a bit, were so exclusive that they were missing something important, namely God's love for the world. Good, common virtue is of God, too, Paul said. The list of virtues in Philippians is found nowhere else in the Bible: true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable. They are not Judeo-Christian words. Rather the words and the values they represent are quoted directly from Greek moral philosophy. They were lifted verbatim from the religion of Rome and they represent Roman culture at its highest and best.

Paul is calling those Christian people away from their understandable isolation, back to a position within the culture, back in the world. And he was doing it by urging them to affirm the basic human virtues as God's will. That has always been a difficult issue for zealous Christians.

Kurt Vonnegut's novel, Palm Sunday, takes its title from an invitation the author received and accepted, to preach a sermon at St. Clement's Episcopal Church in Manhattan on Palm Sunday. Vonnegut calls himself a "God-fearing agnostic...," From the pulpit of St. Clement's he said, "I am enchanted with the Sermon on the Mount. Being merciful, it seems to me, is the only good idea we have received so far. Perhaps we will get another idea that is good bye and bye, and then we will have two good ideas..." [p. 325]

I think we know that we are living through a crisis in common virtue. Motion pictures which deal with the topic continue to be very successful. Several years ago a movie, which almost everybody dismissed originally as too simple, captivated the imagination of the country. "Chariots of Fire" was about common virtue. Eric Liddell, a Scottish divinity student, chooses to put aside his ministry in order to compete in the 1924 Olympics. But then, at the last minute, Liddell refuses to run in the 100 meter dash because the heats will be held on Sunday. People plead with him. The Prince of Wales tries to convince him to run. The audience watching the movie wanted him to compromise. It's a laboratory experience in the difficulty, elegance and rarity of common virtue.

"Memphis Belle," is a movie about a group of young American airmen during the Second World War simply doing their duty. Unlike the heroes of vintage World War II movies, these airmen are not romanticized. They are not larger than life. Their captain owns a furniture store. They are scared to death. When bad weather keeps them from accomplishing their last mission and the plane is in mortal danger from anti-aircraft fire, they have to make a tough decision - drop the bombs without seeing the target and risk hitting a hospital and school, or circle one more time, taking a terrible risk to their own lives. The young furniture salesman tells them, "If we don't do it, someone else will come after us and do it right." Duty, loyalty, courage - common virtue.

There is a sense of moral deterioration among us. In the public sphere there is a crisis in civility. This political campaign has continued a decade-long descent into negativity. In the car recently I listened carefully to monitor the content and tone of political ads for state and local candidates and heard none that discussed important issues

or told me where candidates stood on issues which are important. Instead I heard an uninterrupted barrage of accusations, assuring me that the other candidates were lazy and dishonest, untrustworthy, greedy, sneaky, emotionally unstable, disloyal. It is a sad fact of American political life that character assassination, quite apart from verifiable truth, works. The nastier the better.

Martin Marty laments the lack of civility in the public sphere. "While the committed often lack civility, the civil often lack commitment" he observes. [By Way of Response, p. 81]

Citing sociological theory on the function of conflict, Marty and others have suggested that our political culture always needs an enemy to hate. One sociologist writes: "conflict binds groups together: fanatic partisanship helps the insecure maintain boundaries. The conflict need not be realistic. The weapons are never proportionate to the threat. A deeper human need drives the antagonist: he or she must hate Arab and Jew, Moslem and Hindu, Catholic and Protestant." [Lewis Coser, The Functions of Social Conflict, in Marty, op. cit. p. 75-78]

One of our brightest ethicists, Allistair MacIntyre, in his book, After Virtue, writes about the "deterioration of American civilization as a nexus of public moral discourse" and pleads for what he calls "islands of civility, places where the old-fashioned tradition of public virtue can be maintained through the difficult times ahead of us." Writing at a time when more than 100 high federal officials were either in jail, under indictment, or about to be, MacIntrye said that "our civilization is threatened not by the fact that the barbarians are at the gate, but that they are governing us." [See Lewis Mudge, The Situation in Theological Education: An Essay, May 22, 1987]

"Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing..." The church, St. Paul suggests, is, or ought to be, that island of civility. That's part of our task: to celebrate and advocate a common virtue that makes civilization possible and which the Apostle assures us, reflects the will of God. We are not only to save souls, but to save the soul of the culture, by celebrating its best virtue and exhibiting it in our life. We are not to be a sanctuary of purity away from the world, but an island of civility planted squarely in the world.

And it may be that common virtue is the greatest challenge of all, to live in the world with integrity and fairness and loveliness. That's not hard in a cloistered community of people who believe the same things and are committed to the same goals for society. It is never easy, however, in the midst of the world. The late Karl Rahner, a fine Roman Catholic theologian, wrote, "To keep on, through dull, tedious, everyday existence can be more difficult than a unique deed whose heroism makes us run the danger of pride and self satisfaction. [Meditations on Hope and Love, p. 23]

That prompted me to think of how we celebrate the saints, the ones like Albert Schweitzer who made enormous personal sacrifices in the name of their religious convictions, sometimes suffering, sometimes dying for them. And for every one of them there are many others who shared their vision but

stayed home to help pay the bills. It reminded me of a speech I heard once by one of Martin Luther King's lieutenants to a group of white suburban ministers, everyone of whom desperately wanted to go South and participate in a demonstration for voter registration; King's lieutenant said not everybody can or should go South and march. Rather some have to stay and tell the truth, and bear witness and slug it out where they are. I thought of the church and how whatever it is able to accomplish in the world is not only due to heroic and creative sacrifice by a few, but equally because many people go to work every day and earn a living and pay their bills and then give money quietly, unnecessarily, generously, undramatically, faithfully.

Karl Rahner taught that life is always maneuvering us into a position where common virtue is not easy. I think he was right. The hardest choices are frequently the smallest ones: to be honest when you don't have to be; to be kind to a spouse or significant other when you don't feel kind; to attend a meeting or do a job you don't want to do; to keep your promises. These are the ethical concerns we contend with every day and they are not easy. They are not dramatic. They do not return much of a reward. Who, after all, ever was recognized for being honest with the IRS or attending a P.T.A. meeting or being attentive to a boring friend?

The truth is that common virtue is not common at all; that honesty, fairness, loveliness, honor are heroic virtues and that they are basic to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

> Rahner wrote: "God is the one whom we meet, even though perhaps without naming him, when we dare to be foolish, when we avoid conflicts... that we had a chance of winning when we love without the certainty of being loved in return, when we remain true to our convictions even to our disadvantage." [Ibid, p. 25]

Jesus Christ came among us in the common. The distinguishing mark of our religion is the commonness of its founder. His uniqueness is that he did not go about organizing an institution whose life would be lived behind wells or on mountaintops or behind the mysterious veils of the Holy of Holies. He lived in the world - in the common life of his own culture. The whole incredible notion which we call incarnation and to which we are about to direct all our attention is that the creator God has walked among us, that God was pleased to dwell in the common life of a man. And at its highest and best, the response to that incarnation has not been in cloister, monastery or cathedral, but in ordinary human lives lived in the world with integrity and justice and compassion and courage.

Not everyone can or should respond to Christ and express our faith in a vocationally dramatic way. The common life is where most of us must make sense of things, where all the meaning we can hope to experience must be established and where we must live out our convictions in honest caring, generosity, loyalty.

God blesses that.

God's son came to live like that.

God is pleased when common virtue is celebrated.

And God's kingdom actually comes on earth, the Bible teaches, when common people like you and me, live lives of uncommon virtue.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true - honorable - just - pure- pleasing -commendable... if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Amen.